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Enhancing the quality of VET in Hong Kong: recent reforms and new initiatives in widening participation in tertiary qualifications

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Abstract:

As elsewhere, vocational education and training (VET) has a poor image in Hong Kong. To remove the stigma, the Vocational Training Council of Hong Kong embarked on pro-active strategic planning to make it more relevant and cost-effective, exposed long and widely held myths that VET is for dullards which leads only to low-paid and low-status jobs, provided a through-train education system to ensure that VET is no longer an educational cul-de-sac, and sought external accreditation aggressively. Though it is early days, there is strong evidence that these strategies have worked.

Keywords: vocational education and training; strategic planning; unfounded myths; through-train education; external accreditation

Hong Kong's preferred education path

The six years of primary schooling and the first three years of secondary schooling (S1–S3) are compulsory in Hong Kong. After that, the preferred path is to proceed through another two years of secondary school (S4–S5), which leads to the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), two years of sixth-form education (S6–S7), which leads to the Hong Kong Advanced Level Certificate (HKALE) and three years of university.

The competition to stay in the preferred mainstream education system at the end of S3 is relatively easy because in 2003/04 around 78,500 or 94% of about 83,800 students went through to S4. The decision is based on results of internal school assessments. After that, the competition becomes very keen. At the end of S5 in 2003/04, only 29,400 or 37% of the 78,500 students who sat for the HKCEE, a public examination, proceeded to S6, and at the end of S7, only 14,500 or 49% of the 29,400 who sat for the HKALE, another public examination, went on to university. Thus, of the students who start S3, only 17% go to university, which is very low by OECD standard and the reason for the government's aim to increase it to 30% by 2010/11 (Hong Kong SAR Government 2005). However, in spite of this low participation rate, all students aspire to the preferred route because traditionally it paves the way to a well-paid and high-status job. Those who fail to make it pursue further education in non-mainstream education provided by the Vocational Training Council (VTC), a government-funded organisation, charitable organisations (e.g. Caritas, founded by the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong), commercial organisations (e.g. Hong Kong College of Technology) and the continuing education sections of local universities (e.g. School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPACE) of the University of Hong Kong).

Many of the programmes available in non-mainstream education are in vocational education and training (VET), which provides practical and applied instruction aimed usually at matching students with work positions in industry and commerce. Those aged 15 and numbering over 5000 who do not get into S4 and keen to work in the trades take one-year courses that provide them with the required basic practical skills. Those not attracted to the trades but stand little chance of finding work take two-year less trade-specific courses. Among the 49,000 or so of S5 students, aged 17, who do not make it to S6, those with 5 HKCEE passes, including English, can take three-year Higher Diploma (HD) or two-year Diploma (D) courses. Students with 5 HKCEE passes but not including English can enrol in the Government's one-year Project Yi Jin, previously known as Project Springboard, which is taught in many different education institutions or the VTC's one-year Foundation Diploma (FD) courses. The learning outcome of these programmes, which contain generic and practical modules, is deemed by the government to be equivalent to 5 HKCEE passes for employment and further education purposes (Hong Kong SAR Government 2005). The 15,000 or so of S7 students aged 19 who fail to get into a local university can take two-year HD courses offered by the VTC or two-year Associate Degree courses offered by the continuing education arms of these institutions. After successful completion of these, students can enrol in degree courses of overseas universities in Hong Kong under the so-called inbound top-up degree programmes with providers of non-mainstream education (e.g. the University of Hong Kong's SPACE has collaborations with over 60 institutions from Mainland China, the UK, the USA and Australia). Those who have completed S7 successfully and can afford it can proceed to universities overseas.

Vocational education and training

In Hong Kong, as elsewhere, VET has acquired a stigma and is automatically seen as second-class, good enough only for those who do badly in academic education, with graduates seen to end up only in low-status and low-paid jobs, and little chance of proceeding to university. This is a deeply ingrained image, and to school students, parents and the public alike VET is the education of last resort, when all else fails. It is not helped by the fact that it is traditionally not offered in mainstream education. To add insult to injury, many VET graduates who have gone on to university and become successful in life are not proud to acknowledge that VET has given them a second chance to make good in life, preferring often to drop the VET qualification in their curriculum vitae. The stigma led to the decision, in December 1998, to change the American Vocational Association to the Association for Career and Technical Education and the use of the term career and technical education instead of vocational education (Lynch 2000; Castellano, Stringfield, and Stone III 2003).

There are historical reasons for this (Benavot 1983). VET originated as an alternative to training for working-class children under the apprenticeship system, where they learned skills in artisan and industrial trades under a master craftsman (Dunlop and Denman 1912). The industrial revolution created a demand for standardised, shorter and cheaper job-training processes (Machlup 1970) that led to the rise of technical-vocational schools, which provided such training on a part-time basis, supplemented by training on the job. These schools existed side-by-side with highly exclusive institutions for children of the upper class, and general schools for children of the middle class to enable them to enter higher education and secure positions in the civil service. In the early part of the twentieth century, the political enfranchisement of the middle and working classes lent further support to the development of the technical-vocational schools, as they fitted well into the public school system, and their practical nature was seen to be able to rekindle the interest of 'problematical' students in

school. However, others have argued that the support came because the schools provided the capitalist system's need for a loyal and disciplined labour force (Bowles and Gintis 1976).

Through its establishment as the primary education avenue for working-class youth, VET acquired a stigma among those who aspired to move out of the working class. It fell further from favour with the move towards the provision of egalitarian educational opportunities, as its narrow emphasis limited opportunities for future access to higher educational and occupational positions, and reproduced the social and occupational stratification that spawned it. According to Benavot (1983), this led to a global decline in the share of VET in total enrolment in secondary education, from 24.2% in 1950 to 16.5% in 1975. More recent UNESCO data shows that this decline has continued, reaching 12.9% in 1995 and 10% in 2003 (UNESCO 2005). In newly independent countries, the cause of agricultural and technical education was not helped by the neglect of agriculture and the development of the modern and government sectors, with their demand for clerical and commercial rather than technical skills (Foster 1965). This led to a bias in favour of academic education (Blaug 1972).

In Hong Kong and other societies where Confucian values hold sway, the situation is worsened by the legacy from the imperial examination system in Imperial China. This was introduced in 605 BC to promote the Confucian tenet of meritocracy in the civil service and open to all adult males, regardless of wealth or social status. This contrasted sharply to the previous situation, where entry depended on recommendations from prominent aristocrats and existing officials, with recommended individuals coming very largely from aristocratic ranks (Creel 1960). The examination tested knowledge of the 'Six Arts' of music, arithmetic, writing, knowledge of the rituals and ceremonies in public and private life, archery and horsemanship. It was later expanded to the 'Five Studies' of military strategy, civil law, revenue and taxation, agriculture and geography, and the Confucian classics.

The emphasis on scholastic, military and legal issues and the Confucian classics led to the acceptance and prevalence of basic values in society that had no place for vocational and technical matters. This was reflected in the exclusion, under some dynasties, of members of the merchant class from the examination. As the system lasted continuously for 1300 years, not coming to an end till 1905, these values became deeply ingrained in Chinese society. Under the imperial examination system, education became important because it increased the chances of passing the examination (Gunde 2002) and helped in the cultivation of the proper behaviour of the Confucian 'perfect gentleman' (Ivanhoe 2000). However, it was an education that had little place for VET.

This article examines the strategies that the VTC has used in recent years to try to change the poor image of VET in Hong Kong. It has been chosen because it was established in 1982 as a statutory body to provide VET for Hong Kong and is its largest provider, with over 150,000 students or 35,000 in full-time equivalent terms.

The VTC's strategies

To remove the stigma traditionally attached to VET, the VTC has adopted a number of strategies. These are to introduce a strategic plan to make it more relevant and cost-effective, expose the myths traditionally attached to VET, provide a through-train VET system and adopt a pro-active role in seeking external accreditation.

Eight-year Strategic Plan, 2003/04–2010/11

In late 2001, the Government made known its intentions to make available, within 10 years, post-secondary education to 60% of the relevant age-cohort, with a significant expansion in the VET sector. While this was expected, the plan to provide funding for only half the numbers, with the other half self-funded, was not. For the self-funded sector, the successful Accredited Service Providers (ASPs) and the fees would be decided by the market, subject to government specifications on exit standards and quality. For the government-funded sector, there would be a push for greater efficiency in the provision of courses and awards. While this was again expected, the intention to make the VTC another, though large, ASP, bidding against other public and private ASPs for funds, took away from it the luxury of being a protected government institution assured of annual government funding. In the worst case, it would have to bid for all courses, with fiercest competition expected in popular areas requiring relatively little establishment costs (e.g. Business and certain types of IT), and strong competition in popular but high-cost courses. The criteria for assessing bids were not given, though widely expected to be cost, exit standards and quality though their relative importance was not given. In the best case, the VTC would be asked to run courses that private ASPs have little interest in, which are areas of low student demand and high establishment costs (e.g. manufacturing engineering). No information was provided on the level of funding for ASPs and the percentage of the cost (i.e. fees) that students had to pay. However, the push for greater efficiency and the adoption of the user-pay principle would probably mean a lower subsidy level and a higher student fee. A Manpower Development Committee (MDC) would be set up to advise the Government on the operation of the new education system and the manpower needs of Hong Kong. However, very little detail was given and it would have been natural for the VTC to wait until more information became available before taking action. It would also have been natural for it to lobby, using all its powerful industry contacts, against the move to make it into another ASP. However, the VTC decided not to take either option, deciding immediately of its own accord to prepare a strategic plan for the rest of the decade to help it function more effectively in the new more competitive and cost-conscious environment. The 8-year Strategic Plan (2003/04–2010/11) was produced, with widespread and active staff participation, in time for the start of the 2003/04 academic year.

To respond to the new environment, the VTC has to be more responsive to market demand, reduce unit cost and maintain the quality of its services. Thus, the plan set out to (1) chart a new direction for the VTC, with staff who can participate actively in its affairs and can manage change effectively, (2) maximise income from existing and future market opportunities, (3) enhance productivity, and (4) increase the attractiveness of its courses. Initiatives, with targets, to achieve these aims were produced by 12 working parties and grouped into six major areas. These, together with an important example of each area's initiatives, are (1) Review and Improvement of Existing Products and Services (e.g. reduction and merger of courses), (2) Synergy Building in the VTC (e.g. merger of courses and facilities between the Institute of Vocational Education (IVE) and the Trade and Development (T&D) Centres), (3) Introduction of New Products and Services (e.g. a multiple-entry-and-exit four-year HD programme), (4) Enhancement of Productivity and Cost-Efficiency (e.g. reduction in the operating budget by 20% over eight years), (5) Continuous Improvement of Quality (e.g. conduct of an institutional review and programme validation of a sampler of courses by the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation on a voluntary basis), and (6) Publicity, Promotion, Corporate Communication and Networking

(e.g. creation of a new corporate image for the VTC). A steering group was set up to steer, co-ordinate and monitor the implementation of the initiatives (VTC 2006).

While some of these initiatives were started before the strategic planning exercise, the preparation of the Strategic Plan and the setting of initiatives and targets took place before the establishment of the MDC in October 2002 and the announcement of its programmes. This shows the VTC to be an organisation that is very pro-active in meeting the challenges ahead, and not one that only reacts to external challenges when faced with no choice. Nothing exemplifies this better than the inclusion of the initiative to reduce its operating budget by 20% over eight years before any requirement by the Government. To many staff and external supporters of the VTC, it was foolhardy to volunteer such a reduction and, indeed, should fight tooth and nail to prevent any reduction should it be suggested by the Government. However, the move showed the VTC in good light as it was seen as an institution prepared to make important changes of its own volition rather than have these forced upon it by the Government, which would happen sooner rather than later under the new regime. The move to reduce costs is supported by many initiatives to maintain the quality of its learning and teaching programmes.

Moreover, the preparation and introduction of the Strategic Plan has enabled the VTC to plan and decide in good time when and how it should reduce its expenditures, which led to the timely introduction of many programmes that helped to enhance its productivity and cost-effectiveness. An example is the introduction of a voluntary retirement scheme, which saw the departure of staff in surplus areas who were unwilling or unable to be retrained, and staff who felt unable to cope with a more competitive and accountable education system.

The VTC has used the Strategic Plan as the blueprint for its future development, reviewing, updating and modifying it as circumstances warrant. Implementation of the plan is in its third year, with 10 of the original 37 initiatives successfully completed. The annual and three-year strategic planning exercises, required by the Government, are undertaken around it. In the 2004 and 2005 strategic planning exercises, 11 new proposals were added, and have been grouped and merged with the remaining related initiatives under the six major areas. This pro-active and enterprising approach to make the VTC more relevant and cost-effective has helped to change the widely held view of it as a moribund organisation out of touch with modern requirements but keen to fight to retain its privileged position as a government-funded body.

Exposing myths

Through its advertising programmes, the VTC has moved to expose the myth that VET is only for dullards, with no prospect for further educational advancement, by pointing out that it ignores the fact that students who do poorly in one form of education are not automatically incapable of benefiting from other forms of it. Students learn best when studying things that interest them, and failure to recognise this fundamental point has confined them to many years of boredom, where they are in school but not engaged. The myth is discredited by the fact that, worldwide, VET graduates enter universities with a significant level of advanced standing, and go on to do well. For many years, the VTC's HD graduates have been accepted to do undergraduate studies at local universities, with varying degrees of advanced standing. For example, 25% of the HD graduates from the VTC's Department of Mechanical, Manufacturing and Industrial Engineering and Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering have gone on to study in local universities, especially the School of Engineering of the prestigious Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. The fact that the VTC's

HD graduates can cope with university studies is shown further by their performances in the inbound top-up degree programmes with overseas universities, where these run their courses on its campuses. For example, its HD graduates in Hospitality, Service and Tourism Studies, who enter the final year of the University of Northumbria at Newcastle's three-year Bachelor (Honours) in International Hospitality Tourism programme, which did very well in the Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education's review, have done as well or better than their counterparts in the UK (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the University of Northumbria in Newcastle's BA (Honours) in International Hospitality Tourism by type of students, 2002/03.

Class of degree	Hong Kong students based in Hong Kong (%)	UK students based in the UK (%)
1st class	0	0
2nd class upper division	12	6
2nd class lower division	79	44
3rd class	7	50
Pass degree	0	20
Fail	2	0

Another myth that the VTC spent time debunking is that a VET education has limited economic value. This widespread belief is surprising since there is ample empirical evidence to show sustained economic growth is possible only with an adequate supply of workers with technical and vocational skills (Chowdhury and Islam 1993; Lim 1996). In Hong Kong, there is a strong demand for workers at the associate professional level (Education and Manpower Bureau 2005), which is the level catered for by the VET sector, and the employment rate of the VTC's graduates exceeds 80% even in depressed economic times.

The irony is that in countries such as Australia and Canada there is a strong two-way movement of students between the university and VET sectors to show that VET graduates can cope with university studies and that university graduates continue with VET studies to improve their employment prospects. Table 2 shows the situation in Australia over the 1997–2002 period, where the absolute number of students moving from the university sector to the VET sector consistently exceeded that moving in the other direction, with the gap increasing (Harris, Sumner, and Rainey 2005).

Through-train VET system

Another strategy is to provide an efficient through-train education system, which allows students to proceed from one level to another of the VTC's award system, without hindrance and repetition of learning. This is extended to degree level, with the operation of top-up degree programmes with universities. All this has increased the attractiveness of VET as an alternative route to education.

The VTC offers a large number and variety of courses at the so-called Higher Technician, Technician and Craft levels, with the delivery of courses traditionally demarcated, IVE responsible for vocational education and the T&D Centres vocational training. At the Higher Technician level are three-year full-time HD courses and two-year full-time HD courses. The three-year HD courses can be taken in nine disciplines (Applied Science, Business Administration, Child Education and Community Services, Construction, Design, Printing, Textiles and Clothing, Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Hotel, Services and Tourism Studies, Information Technology, and Mechanical, Manufacturing and Industrial Engineering). The minimum entry requirements are 5 HKCEE passes, including one in English Language (Syllabus B) or its equivalent. The two-year HD courses, introduced only in 2002/03, are for students who have completed S7.

Table 2. Two-way movement between VET and university studies in Australia, 1997 and 2002.

	VET students continuing with university studies	University students continuing with VET studies	(2)/(1)
Year	(1)	(2)	(%)
1997	38,455	57,330	1.5
1998	38,760	63,270	1.6
1999	38,133	73,968	1.9
2000	36,137	73,037	2.0
2001	37,221	72,017	2.0
2002	35,835	73,492	2.0

Source: Harris, Sumner, and Rainey (2005).

At the Technician level are two-year full-time D courses, one-year full-time FD courses, one-year full-time Technician Foundation Certificate (TFC) courses and one-year full-time Vocational Certificate (VC) courses. The D courses have the same entry requirements as the three-year HD courses, with offerings in the same disciplines. The FD courses are for students who have completed S5 but not done well enough to obtain 5 HKCEE passes, including English Language (Syllabus B) or its equivalent. The course is evenly divided between developing communication skills (e.g. English, Chinese and IT) and vocational skills (e.g. Business, Computing and Hospitality). Recently, the VTC introduced the multiple-entry-and-exit four-year HD programme, which has the same minimum entry requirement as the stand-alone FD programme but, unlike the stand-alone FD and HD programmes, guarantees students progression all the way to the HD level, if they do well at each stage. The TFC and VC courses, for students completing S5, offer more specialised courses than the FD courses.

At the Craft level are two-year full-time Certificate in Vocational Studies (CVS) courses and one-year full-time Basic Craft Certificate (BCC) courses. The CVS courses are for students who have only completed S3, with little chance of finding gainful employment. The aim is to improve communication ability through studies in English, Chinese and IT, self-esteem through programmes on personal development and team-work, and vocational skills through programmes on business, technical and computing areas. The BCC courses are for S3 leavers who are not interested to proceed to S4 and S5, and serve as the technical or vocational equivalent of post-S3 education. Like TFC courses, they provide vocational training in simulated industrial environments in craft trades, and, on completion, trainees are normally employed as second-year craft apprentices in a relevant trade. While so employed, they may concurrently continue their study in a complementary part-time course.

In September 2001, the VTC established the VTC School of Business and Information Systems (SBI) as a self-funding operation to support the Government's policy initiative to double in 10 years the provision of post-secondary education for senior secondary school-leavers. This was before the implementation of the recommendation of the Sutherland Report (Sutherland 2002) to charge market fees for many of the government-funded sub-degree courses in popular areas (e.g. Business Administration and IT). The SBI offers market-fee HD and D courses mainly in Business Administration.

For workers keen to upgrade their qualifications, the VTC runs part-time courses in the evening or on a part-time day-release mode for those given one day per week to study. At the Higher Technician level are two-year Higher Certificate (HC) courses and two-year HD courses for HC and D holders. At the Technician level are two-year Certificate (C) courses, two-year Foundation Certificate (FC) courses and two-year VC courses. At the Craft level are three-year CVS courses and two-year Craft Certificate (CC) courses. The minimum entry requirement for HC courses, which are being phased out, is the possession of a relevant C. The minimum entry requirements for C and FC courses are the same as those for D and FD courses respectively, while those for VC, CVS and CC courses are the same as those for their full-time counterparts.

The VTC's commitment to meet the needs of different secondary students is also shown in other activities. In August 1991, it began to administer apprentice training and provide skills training for people with disabilities. In September 2003, it participated in a pilot project under the Career Oriented Diversified Curriculum (CODC), now known as Career Oriented Studies (COS), of the Education and Manpower Bureau, to offer senior secondary students the chance to study vocational modules in creative studies, engineering, IT, languages and services. It extended this programme by offering tailor-made vocational modules to a number of senior secondary schools. In 2004/05, it set up a senior secondary school, under the government's direct subsidy scheme, where students can choose between mainstream and vocational education for progression to further study in either university or the VTC.

Mention has already been made to the inbound top-up degree programmes that the VTC has with a number of overseas universities. The first was with Leeds Metropolitan University in 1999 and now includes, among others, the UK's University of Manchester (Business, with 33% advanced standing for the VTC's HD graduates) and Queen Mary, London (Computer Science, 33% advanced standing), and Australia's Swinburne University of Technology (Computing, 67% advanced standing) and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University (Engineering, 67% advanced standing). There is only one agreement with local universities (the Open University for undergraduate and MBA programmes) because these have large excess demand for their courses and, hence, have shown little interest. There is

also an outbound top-up programme with the London School of Economics and Political Science, where the VTC's HD graduates in Business enter the second year of a three-year Honours programme in London, with an advanced standing of 33% and having to take remedial classes in Mathematics and Statistics. Negotiations have been under way with Birmingham University and Southampton University.

Table 3 summarises the VTC's different major mainstream awards and their minimum entry requirements. The important thing about the array of courses at the different award levels is the provision of a clear progression pathway not only between the different levels within each delivery aim of the VTC but also between them. For example, not only can a CVS graduate proceed to FD, D and HD studies, but a BCC graduate can also proceed to CVS studies and thereafter to HD studies. Exceptional BCC, CVS and FD students can end up with a HD after six, five and four years respectively of study. This is a far cry from the traditional situation where a student with poor academic grades but interested in further studies can hope at most for a BCC or CVS award before entering the work force. Another example is the multiple-entry-and-exit four-year HD programme, where students are guaranteed progression all the way to the HD level, if they do well at each stage.

Table 3. The VTC's major awards and their minimum entry requirements, and the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF).

HKQF Level	Vocational education		Vocational training	
	Course	Minimum entry requirements	Course	Minimum entry requirements
4	Three-year HD	5 HKCEE subjects at Grade E, including English	-	-
	Two-year HD	Completion of S7 + 5 HKCEE subjects at Grade E, including English		
	One-year HD	VTC's D		
3	Two-year D	5 HKCEE subjects at Grade E, including English	Two-year TC	Completion of S5, with 5 HKCEE subjects at Grade E
2	One-year FD	Completion, but not necessarily successfully, of S5	One-year TFC	Completion of S5, with three or more HKCEE subjects at Grade E
1	Two-year CVS	Completion, but not necessarily	One-year BCC	Completion, but not necessarily

		successfully, of S3		successfully, of S3
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Note: HD, Higher Diploma; D, Diploma; FD, Foundation Diploma; CVS, Certificate of Vocational Studies; TC, Technical Certificate; TFC, Technician Foundation Certificate; BCC, Basic Craft Certificate.
Grade E is a Pass.

The provision of through-train education has required the VTC to expand into new activities in traditional and non-traditional VET areas. The former has helped to maintain the character of VET and reinforce its role as an alternative to academic education. An example is the offer, starting in September 2003 under the Government's COS project, VET studies (e.g. hair design, 3-D computer animation and video production, with each module lasting 180 hours) for S4 and S5 students. The VTC offers these in its own campuses but sometimes in the schools, with the long-term aim of the schools taking them over under a franchising arrangement, with the VTC responsible for quality assurance. There is so much interest in the scheme that many other schools have entered into separate agreements with the VTC to run similar programmes for them. By 2006/07, the VTC will offer nearly 7000 COS student-modules. A parallel initiative is the establishment of a senior secondary school in 2004, which offers a wide range of COS courses and traditional academic courses. It began with 360 S4 students and aims to enrol 930 by 2007, with the aim of developing it into a centre for offering COS courses in the surrounding areas. The immediate aim is to engage students bored by traditional academic subjects. The long-term aim is to have such studies as an integral part of a diversified school curriculum that suits the varied interests and requirements of students and society and accepted by universities for entry. The hope is that VET forms a part of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Studies, when this super-sedes the HKCEE and HKALE as the exit assessment for secondary school education and selection for admission to university. Another example is the introduction of the Vocational Development Program in 2004, which offers vocationally oriented 'taster' programmes for the so-called non-engaged youths who have fallen out of the school system after S3 and have little chance of finding work. As such students find normal courses quite formidable, much shorter courses of around 240 hours on vocational, generic and life skills have been provided. The idea is for them to get a taste of what is possible, and, once re-engaged, will go back to mainstream education or enrol in longer VET courses (e.g. CVS). The introduction of non-traditional VET activities has ensured that VET is a living system, prepared and able to link with other education systems to provide a better deal for its graduates. The most important non-traditional VET activity introduced is the top-up degree programmes with universities.

The provision of through-train education within the VTC has been made possible by integrating the courses, facilities and management of IVE and T&D Centres, the two delivery arms. The latest example of course integration is the piloting of a three-year Diploma in Vocational Studies, which integrates the BCC, CVS and TFC courses. The first two years emphasise workplace rather than generic skills and are meant for those who want to enter the work force as soon as possible. The third year emphasises generic skills and is meant for those who want to continue with further studies. The latest example of management integration is merging the separate positions of the Deputy Executive Director (Academic), in charge of IVE, and the Deputy Executive Director (Training and Development), in charge of T&D Centres, into the position of the Deputy Executive Director (Operation).

There is ample evidence that the through-train education system does work. For example, CVS graduates had performed satisfactorily in FD courses from 2001/02 to 2004/05 and in Level 1 of the multiple-entry-and-exit four-year HD programme in 2004/05, and at a level roughly comparable to that of students with the same Educational Attainment Index (EAI) from their HKCEE results (Lim 2007). Their performance in the graduating and non-graduating HD/D classes from 2002/03 to 2004/05 was also roughly similar to that of the other students. This success encouraged the VTC very recently to formally allow 'elite' CVS graduates, who have an average mark of 80% for all the modules, including English and Mathematics, to proceed, with extra tuition in English, to the two-year D or three-year HD courses.

The performance of FD graduates in graduating and non-graduating HD/D classes from 2002/03 to 2004/05 has also been generally comparable to that of students with 5 HKCEE passes, including English (Syllabus B) (Lim 2007). It is certainly better than that of graduates of the Government's Project Yi Jin, whose exit standard is deemed by the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation and the Government to be equivalent to 5 HKCEE passes for employment and further education purposes.

The VTC's HD graduates enrolled in undergraduate programmes of local universities and in inbound top-up degree programmes with overseas universities have also done well. For many years, the VTC's HD graduates have been accepted to do undergraduate studies at local universities, with varying degrees of advanced standing (e.g. engineering courses in the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and business courses in the City University of Hong Kong). The fact that this has gone on for many years shows that they can cope with university studies. As far as the VTC's graduates in inbound top-up degree programmes are concerned, reference has already been made to their results, which are comparable to those of their overseas counterparts (Table 1).

Today, students, parents and employers alike see learning as a lifelong process. Having an efficient progression path will promote this, as it encourages students at each level to study harder, as they know that they can proceed to the highest award in the VTC and through the top-up degree programmes to a degree and beyond. It is a powerful tool that the VTC has used to good effect to change people's perception that VET does not lead anywhere, thereby helping to remove the stigma attached to it.

External evaluation

Another strategy to improve the image of the VTC and, by implication, VET, is to adopt a pro-active approach to external evaluation, and not to submit to it only when required. Examples of mandatory accreditation exercises are the ones conducted by the Hong Kong Institution of Engineers (HKIE) and the accounting professions, in which the VTC has done well. Thus, in 2002/03, the VTC invited the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA), known as the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) from 1 October 2007, to conduct an institutional review of its operations and the programme validation of a sampler of its courses (10 IVE and 6 T&D Centre courses). This was before the onset of the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF), which requires institutions without self-accrediting status to have their courses quality-assured by the HKCAA before they can grant awards listed on the seven-level framework. The management decided to proceed even when it became clear that the HKQF would take some time to become operational, and to reject the argument, made strongly in many quarters, that it should wait until then. By its action, the VTC showed that it was

confident enough to have its quality assurance system evaluated by an independent external body when there was no official need for it. In an environment where students, parents and the public alike are keen to see value for money, and where the competition for students is fierce, this would put it in good light and, in turn, help to remove the stigma attached to VET.

In line with this pro-active stance, the VTC decided to use a format for the presentation of its institutional review that was very different to that used by the HKCAAVQ. The VTC's format follows logically its 'fitness for purpose' approach to quality assurance, which sees quality in education services as being achieved when these meet the organisation's stated purpose. Thus, the presentation describes what the VTC does (i.e. its mission), the systems and activities it has to support the achievement of its purpose (i.e. its management processes), the indicators it uses to show if it has achieved this (i.e. the instruments to measure effectiveness), and the ways it sets about seeking feedback and applying what it has learned (i.e. its improvement plan). By contrast, the HKCAAVQ's format had no discernable coherence, was over-concerned with administrative details (e.g. the frequency of committee meetings) and paid scant attention to an organisation's mission.

The results of the HKCAAVQ's 2002–2003 exercise, which included overseas auditors on the panels, are very positive. In the institutional review, the VTC was seen to fulfil its mission well, and in the programme validations, its courses to meet their objectives, with standards that are comparable to those of similar courses elsewhere. Very soon after this, in keeping with its pro-active approach to external evaluation, the VTC approached the HKCAAVQ to evaluate its suitability for self-accrediting status under the HKQF and its associated quality assurance mechanism. It was fully aware that this would make it the first institution to be examined under the new quality assurance regime, with all the inherent risks that this entails, as there was no template for doing anything and no published statement on, or history of, the standards required for self-accrediting status. Another uncertainty was that the HKCAAVQ itself, after a recent review on its suitability for the enlarged quality assurance role under the HKQF, was undergoing significant structural and personnel changes. A more cautious approach would have been to wait until at least one institution had been evaluated and learn from its experience, or to wait until the HKCAAVQ had sorted out its inevitable teething problems. A third risk was that the VTC as a whole could be suffering from reform and accreditation fatigue, as it had just gone through a strategic planning exercise and an evaluation by the HKCAAVQ, and was busy implementing the initiatives of the former and the recommendations of the latter. Moreover, the self-accrediting status exercise would be more comprehensive and set higher standards than the previous HKCAAVQ exercise, and would involve more staff, which could stretch its human and physical resources.

The self-accrediting status exercise in 2005/06, now called the 'programme area accreditation' (PAA) status exercise, required the VTC to first submit an Institutional Review (IR). This would be followed by 20 Discipline Reviews (DRs), which consist of 9 for HD/D courses and 7 for HC/C courses, covering 16 of the 21 programme areas of The List of 21 Areas of Study and Training of the HKQF's Qualifications Register, and four for BCC and TFC courses covering four programme areas, and one for CVS/FD courses, which are not discipline-specific.

While the IR has the same coverage as the previous one, the DR is very different to the Program Validation, as it covers all the courses in the Discipline (e.g. the 11 HD and 1 D courses in the Electrical and Electronic Engineering Discipline), compared to the Program Validation, which deals with only one course (e.g. the HD in Electronic Communications

Engineering). In addition, it requires the claimed award levels (e.g. the HD award at Level 4) to be justified against the HKQF's general and discipline-specific descriptors.

The gamble has paid off because the results have been positive. A total of 62 sub-areas within the 16 programme areas offered by IVE and SBI were approved for PAA status. For the vast majority of established HD and D courses, the period is 5 years at the claimed HKQF Levels 4 and 3 respectively. For new courses, the period is only 2 years after pre-conditions, which are not onerous, have been met by a certain period. HC/C courses have been granted PAA status for the same periods as their HD/D counterparts. However, the HKQF level for the HC is 3, the same as C courses, and not 4 as claimed. The new multiple-entry-and-exit 4-year HD was given PAA status for all the sub-areas approved for HD, D, HC and C courses and for the same respective periods. The HKQF Levels for the exit awards after Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3, and Year 4 are 2, 3 and 4 respectively. CVS/FD courses have been granted PAA status for 4 years at Level 2, with the status for CVS courses limited only to the existing three streams but granted to all future streams of FD courses.

A total of 16 sub-areas within five programme areas offered by the T&D Centres were granted PAA status after certain pre-conditions have been met. The most important are the integration of the practical training modules and academic modules in all aspects and levels of the courses, and the passing of both categories of courses before students can graduate. The period for most of the BCC and TFC courses is three years at the claimed HKQF Level 2. There are recommendations for change for all courses but these are sensible and not difficult to implement.

Evidence of effectiveness of strategies

As the view that VET is an inferior form of education chosen only as a last resort is so ingrained in the minds of students, parents and the public alike, it will take a long time before any attempt to change it bears fruit. However, there are encouraging early signs from surveys, enrolment figures for market-fee courses, and responses to the VTC's requests for government funds and bidding for government projects, that the strategies to remove the stigma attached to VET are beginning to have an impact.

Survey on public perception of the VTC

In 2005, to assess the response of external stakeholders to the implementation of its 8-year Strategic Plan, the VTC commissioned a consultancy company, Policy 21 of the University of Hong Kong, to conduct a survey on their perception of the VTC's ability to (1) provide adequate theory and practice in its courses, (2) prepare students for lifelong learning, (3) produce graduates with professional skills, (4) provide a through-train education, (5) stimulate student interest, (6) meet the needs of students with different learning interests and abilities, (7) meet the needs of employers, (8) keep abreast with industry changes, and (9) produce graduates with the right working attitude and inter-personal skills (VTC 2005a).

It was carried out between February and May 2005 on 5381 respondents (1394 parents, 63 secondary school principals, 62 career-masters, 592 teachers, 1296 secondary school students, 1417 employers who had and had not employed the VTC's graduates, and 557 VTC graduates) (Policy 21 2005). A Likert scale of 10 was used, with one indicating the least satisfaction with the VTC and 10 the most. The overall performance index is 6.3, which is a good score according to Policy 21. Of the respondents from schools, career-masters gave it the highest mark (7.00), probably because they are more knowledgeable about the VTC, with

principals giving it 6.53 and teachers 6.26. Current students gave it 6.07 and graduates 6.91, possibly because the true worth of a programme only becomes apparent some time after graduation, and parents 5.93. Employers who have employed the VTC's graduates rated it 6.06, those who have never employed them, not surprisingly, only 5.66.

The overall results show that the public has a positive image of the VTC and the programmes it provides and, by implication, VET generally. This is supported by the specific results, especially those that show most parents were ready to recommend their children to study in the VTC and more than 50% of the students were happy to do so, and that 80% of the employers were definitely or probably happy to consider employing the VTC's graduates. The results are credible because the respondents are direct recipients of the VTC's services and the survey was carried out by a reputable independent organisation often commissioned by other education institutions in Hong Kong to carry out such surveys.

Survey on staff perception of the VTC

At the same time as the survey on external stakeholders, the VTC conducted a web-based survey on the perception of its staff on its performance (VTC 2005b). Of the 3304 full-time staff requested to respond anonymously to the questionnaire, 1802 (55%) did so, which is high for such surveys. The first part dealt with how staff viewed the performance of the VTC externally as an educational provider (e.g. whether it is customer-focused and its programmes meet the needs of young people) and internally as an employer (e.g. whether the physical facilities are adequate and the communication channels effective). The same Likert scale was used.

The staff members were satisfied with the overall performance of the VTC as an educational provider and an employer, with scores of 7.26 and 6.99 respectively, an average of 7.19. This is a good score when compared to those obtained for similar surveys by other education institutions in Hong Kong. The result for the VTC's performance as an employer is especially noteworthy because the implementation of the Strategic Plan has been stressful for its staff members. These overall results, which are supported by the specific ones, are credible because an organisation's staff members are usually the hardest to please as they know it well and can distinguish between reality and rhetoric. The data have also been obtained anonymously, which enabled the respondents to reveal their real views without being penalised.

Enrolment in sub-vented and market-fee courses

In spite of fierce competition, enrolments in the VTC's courses in the market-fee sector, introduced after the implementation of the recommendation of the Sutherland Report (2002) for government to fund only those sub-degree programmes that have high start-up and maintenance costs, satisfy specific manpower needs and provide endangered skills, have been met or exceeded. These are offered as multiple-entry-and-exit four-year HD programmes, mainly in Business Administration (19 courses), Hotel, Services and Tourism Studies (five courses) and IT (nine courses). While it is still early days, the success of its market-fee courses suggests that the campaign to improve the image and substance of the VTC has succeeded in persuading students and parents that it provides value for money.

However, having greater numbers in the VTC's market-fee or, for that matter, its government-funded programmes, is not the same as having the stigma attached to VET removed, as it may simply reflect VET's traditional role as the depositary of unemployed

youth when things go bad. In developing countries with low economic and employment growth, high labour force growth, and high unemployment and under-employment rates, governments often respond by expanding formal public education and training and absorbing their graduates into government employment (Gill, Fluitman, and Dar 2000). VET plays a prominent role in this because of the belief that it provides the practical and applied skills required for employment. The same tendency is seen in countries undergoing post-industrialisation, where higher income produces needs that are less material and more service-oriented, and employment in services replaces employment in industrial work, just as the latter replaced employment in primary production during the period of industrialisation (Soubotina 2004). The fastest growth in demand for services is in knowledge- and information-related areas (e.g. education, R&D, modern communications and business services), which requires skills that are not found among the young. VET is then used as a vehicle for absorbing them and there will be a positive relationship between VET enrolment and the level of youth unemployment.

While the case of developing countries does not apply to Hong Kong, that of post-industrialisation can as, perhaps even more than the West, it is going through such a period (Enright 2000), with its manufacturing activities phased out in favour of ones more suitable for its role now as the main service, logistics, communication and financial hub within the Greater Pearl River Delta (PRD) region (Tuan and Ng 2004). However, there is prima facie evidence to suggest that the increase in the VTC's VET enrolment in the recent period of 2003–2007 may not have much to do with it being an avenue of last resort for the young. First, the increase coincided with a consistently falling unemployment rate for the population as a whole, so there was less need for the unemployed to enrol in courses generally and VET ones in particular, as something to while away the time while waiting for the employment situation to improve. Second, it also coincided with a consistently falling unemployment rate for the 15–19 age-group (Table 4). The negative relationship between the two variables shows that the availability of greater employment opportunities had not deterred some from enrolling in the VTC, suggesting the enrolment to be a conscious choice of study over work.

Table 4. Unemployment rates in Hong Kong, 2003–2007.

Year	Unemployment rate (15 years and above) (%)	Unemployment rate (15–19 years)
2003	7.9	30.2
2004	6.8	26.1
2005	5.6	21.8
2006	4.8	21.8
2007 (January–June)	4.1	19.6

Source: Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong SAR Government (2007).

The actions taken by the VTC in its strategic planning to provide courses that are more relevant to the needs of a knowledge-based economy would have played a part in bringing this about. In the face of an improving labour market, the young would not have given up opportunities for earning in favour of studying, unless that study will lead to gainful

employment later. Examples of new courses introduced that are more in line with Hong Kong's requirements are those in product testing, creative toy and intelligent product technology, biomedical electronics and internet and multimedia engineering in the engineering area, and those in transport logistics, supply-chain management and China business in the business area. In design, new courses covering most of the creative industries identified in the Baseline Study on Hong Kong's Creative Industries (Hong Kong SAR Government 2003) were introduced to help the government's plan to turn Hong Kong into a centre of excellence for visual communication, product and interior design, fashion design, multi-media entertainment design and technology.

Bids for government projects and funds

The VTC has been successful in bidding for government projects such as the programme for non-engaged youth, the development of the COS, and the development of the Generic Level Descriptors for the HKQF and the detailed descriptors for many of the 21 areas of study and training. Most recently, it had been successful in obtaining significant government funding for a new purpose-built campus to house the Hong Kong Design Institute, scheduled for completion in 2009/10. This was established in 2007 by bringing together the strengths of five existing departments and extending their programmes to provide the world-class fundamental design talent skills needed for developing Hong Kong's creative industry. Programmes include product design, interior design, toy design, jewellery design, watch design, fashion and textile design, visual communications, printing and digital media, filming, computer games and multimedia. It is unlikely that the VTC would have succeeded in securing support and funding from the government for such a variety of projects if it had been seen as a moribund institution teaching programmes with no relevance for Hong Kong.

Concluding remarks

Preliminary evidence suggests that the strategies adopted by the VTC to remove the stigma attached to VET generally and to itself in particular have borne fruit. However, a lot more work remains to be done, as it is not easy to change a deeply ingrained image. This work will continue under the VTC's 8-year Strategic Plan (2003/04–2010/11) to make it more responsive to market forces, operate with lower costs and provide quality services.

These strategies must be underpinned by relevant and quality teaching because without this they will not amount to much. Without well-designed courses and good teachers, myths about VET cannot be dispelled, through-train education effected and external accreditation achieved. To ensure that course content, delivery and assessment are in line with educational best practice and industry needs, the VTC has a quality assurance system, funding for staff development, including industrial attachment, and in-house short courses tailored for the special requirements of its students (Lim 2005). At the same time, the VTC should promote its activities effectively because without the public knowing about them, it will not benefit from all the hard work involved in turning the organisation around. This is why it has pursued an aggressive publicity campaign recently, introducing and using liberally a new corporate slogan, forging more partnerships with external stakeholders and conducting more frequent targeted school talks and meetings with school career-masters and parents. The result of this concerted effort has been a far better understanding and appreciation by the public of what the VTC does and aspires to do, and therefore more favourable press coverage of it. The strategies and the underpinning programmes must be designed and implemented as a package, as one without the other will not be effective.

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